# The Chord

JOAN FULLER

The train moved into the reflection of the dawn. Paul opened his eyes and looked out at the grey-black silhouettes of telephone poles stalking by, and the slowly rounding land. For a moment in the dawn, they looked like half-remembered poles and fields moving in a dream. But then he was awake and knew he was awake and California was ahead.

Home was ahead. Three years were being pressed to the past with the weight of every pole which moved to pile behind him. Three years of creating the hollow rooms for actors to cry their empty words through. Three years of small civic theaters and small summer theaters and small salaries. But he smiled and scoffed himself. It was always different and it was almost all exiting. The dusty, pugent smell of paint, the grimy feel of it beneath his nails — a griminess that wasn't grime but was pleasant in its unpleasantness. The watching of a thing created grow to beauty of its own, yet existing, as he planned, only as a part of another creation, and making of the parts a whole. That was good. And the people had been good. All kinds of people, dull and interesting, good and bad, stupid and with genius. People were all interesting. They were vital as colours.

He coughed and shifted in his seat. His legs were tired and his back ached. But he had slept a little. That was surprising. It would be good to be back for a while. It wouldn't be good to stay there, but a visit would be fine. He owed it to his father. And then New York would be even more wonderful from his having been away. Most of his friends had left Pasadena. But there were people in Hollywood and his father was there, a grey-green old man and lonely. Funny how sentimental you get about families when you're away for a while. There was an anticipation that was almost pain in him as he thought of his father. It seemed unimportant that they hadn't got along. Three years was a long time and his father hadn't meant it when he said Paul was crazy. "The men in the white coats will get you someday," he'd said even when Paul was a child. But his name was becoming pretty well known now and he was proving he wasn't crazy. Besides, that was twenty years ago. His father wouldn't feel that way now. Three years was a long time and he'd read aloud and laughed when Paul was a boy. Three years was a long time and his grey-green eyes wouldn't be cold any more.

Paul coughed and sat up and then pulled a cigarette out of the pocket of his red wool shirt and lighted it with matches from a paper folder. *Leon & Eddy's,* it said. Not an exiting place. Someone must have given him the matches. That was his last cigarette. He crumpled the empty package and dropped it on the floor. He could get some more later.

Someone groaned and someone said, "God," very wearily, and he remembered the soldiers. The train was jammed with them. They were piled on the seats and sprawled in the aisles, and there was something rather terribly forlorn in the closeness of the press of their pale-uniformed bodies in the dirty light of dawn. He'd had drinks and talk with many of them since New York. They were on their way to California too, but not going home; going to some port of embarcation and then jungle-fighting perhaps. At least he didn't face that. He sighed and coughed again.

He moved his feet away from the fellow below him. This was a new one. Paul suddenly remembered he'd gotten up in the night and stepped right in the man's stomach. And he hadn't even stirred. Suddenly the fellow opened his eyes and squinted up a little. He yawned widely and his tongue was gray and his teeth large. Paul looked out of the window again.

There was a discouraging dullness to the rolling country, and few houses. The telephone poles were still leaping along with a rather disturbing regularity like people caught in the machine-tread of modernity. Strangely he thought of grey shadowed faces in a subway train. Then he noticed that the rhythm of the poles' passing fitted into the quick plat of the wheels. He could put words to it. "*Cal*ifornia-here-I-come, *Cal*ifornia-here-I come," he could say to himself, and the poles passed on each "*Cal.*" He grinned a little at his own childishness and yawned. The morning looked as if it would be magnificent. The sky was like a Rubens lady, rising; placid, glowing, and uninspired. His cigarette was a butt and he dropped it between the soldier and his own foot and stepped on it. Automatically he reached for another and remembered they were gone. Oh, well. The doctor said he shouldn't smoke anyway. And his mouth tasted stale.

"Cigarette?" asked the soldier suddenly.

"Well — "

"Here, I have some."

Paul looked down at him a bit surprised. Then a small grin twitched his face. "Better not. You don't know what I did to you last night."

The soldier moved his eyebrows. "What?"

"Stepped right in your middle." He was a handsome chap. Only a boy, really. Blond and clean and strong.

The boy laughed. "Well, have one anyway," he said and held up a pack of Chesterfields.

They both took cigarettes and Paul lighted them with a match from the folder. He didn't like *Leon & Eddy's*. Who could have given them to him, he thought. He didn't like Chesterfields but it was nice of the boy. He had a beautiful body; firm, square muscled shoulders and a flat breast. His twill uniform was somewhat soiled and netted with wrinkles. "Did you have a bad night of it?" he asked.

The boy shrugged. "Not so hot. How'd you rate a seat?"

"I got here first. And I was so damned tired I just hung on to it."

"Don't blame you. Where're you headed?"

"Los Angeles. Going to visit my father. You're—ah—headed for San Francisco?"

"Um hum." He looked at his pants. "And we gotta stand inspection when we get there. My God," he said.

Paul felt sorry for him. He grinned. "Oh, well. Maybe they'll throw you out of the Army."

"No such luck. But they might gig us."

"Gig? What's that?"

"Demerit. You have to walk around in circles for a while to work 'em off."

"How intriguing."

"Yeah." The boy gave him a rather odd glance.

"They'll consider the way you've had to travel, though," Paul said.

"I know. But it makes me so damn mad. Inspection. Won't be white glove, anyway." He stared at his shoes for a moment and drew at his cigarfette. Quite suddenly, watching him, Paul felt old and ill and ugly. This boy was so vital and

somehow clean even after sleeping on the floor all night.

"Why aren't you fellows on troop trains?" he asked because he felt he had to say something.

"Oh, most of us are coming back from furloughs. We usually get one before we go over, you know."

"Do you mind going?" asked Paul then.

"No. Why should I? It's the job. But this damned inspection gripes me."

"If you'd gone on a troop train you wouldn't have to stand would you?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"I'd think that would teach you how a herring feels."

"Yeah."

"Of course you could get pickled." That was a dreadful pun but Paul felt a little desperate.

However, the boy grinned. "We do. And sing *Sweet Adaline.*"

"That should be gay."

"Yeah."

He was silent again and Paul felt he ought to say something else but he was shy about asking any more questions. He sounded like a prosecutor. Most of the boys were waking up now. They were standing to stretch cramped muscles, talking and laughing to each other. Paul felt alone and very tired. This uniformed crew of kids seemed to be the life of the world, laughing and young and light, even on their way to war and the possibility of death. And he really didn't have a part in any of it. The only reason the kid talked to him was that he was so close.

"Did you have a good furlough?" he asked the boy quickly.

The kid smiled. "Um hum. It was swell to see my family. It's been almost a year since I went in."

"Has it."

"Yeah. Dad's not very well, though. He's going to have an operation. He'll be all right though. Lots of old men have it. It was good to see them."

"I haven't seen my father for three years. I'll be glad to get home again, too."

"What does he do?"

"Oh, he's retired. He's nearly seventy. He used to sell insurance." Paul smiled a little ,suddenly. Insurance. No wonder he thought his son was crazy.

The boy was looking at him curiously, inspecting his clothes. He felt suddenly conscious of them, of his red shirt and the splotched tie that looked like a Kandinsky. "You must be some sort of artist," the kid said. There was a bourgeois sort of tolerance that was nearly scorn in his voice. It hurt Paul suddenly that this handsome boy should scorn him. That was stupid really because it really didn't matter.

"Yes," he said.

"What kind?" It was the boy's turn to be prosecutor.

"I paint — scenery principally," Paul said a little coldly.

"Scenery?"

"Stage scenery."

"Oh," said the boy ,and the scorn was greater in his voice. Paul saw him look at the shabbiness of his green trousers. They were rather disreputable, of course, and he should get rid of them. But what did it matter. And besides they were comfortable. Oh, well, this fellow probably sold insurance like his father used to do. The boy was like his father. That was the way he'd say it and stare at Paul's legs. He dropped the cigarette and stepped on it and coughed.

Then he looked at the soldiers again. All awake and talking. Griping, probably, but laughing. A couple of them were playing craps on the train floor. And he fancied he could see scorn in all their faces, all

their faces ignoring him, thinking him "bugs."

He looked out of the window and a desolation grey as the dawn they were leaving behind them filled him. It was the kind of loneliness that came on him so frequently of late, and most often in a crowd. It was partly that he wasn't well. But in that crowded train he felt completely solitary and he remembered his father saying in the voice of a strong blond soldier, "The men in the white coats will get you some day. They'll come right up to the door and get you." That's what they all felt when they looked at him. Eccentric and getting old.

Why should people laugh at his clothes. He wore them because he liked them. They were comfortable and red was a beautiful warming colour. And a red shirt gave him a sense of independence, usually.

But most people were so blind. They only looked at the edges of things with their close brains. They didn't know how to feel in the sunset or to weep at the cry of a cello.

He shut his eyes, suddenly feeling that loneliness so tight inside him he could have cried out. No, it was he who was wrong. He was queer and crazy and life was no more than a sweat-smelling train pushing into the night. How could it be more. People dominated life and they pushed and shoved for the best seats and they died. And if you thought life more than transient, they laughed and scorned you and left you scrabbling on the carpet seeking for the pattern. While — "Time flows past you like a river," — and the men in the white jackets crept up behind.

He sighed and opened his eyes, and suddenly he caught his breath. The train was making a long curve, and straight ahead with the sunrise on their shoulders were the mountains.

Pile against painted pile they lay, stained with sun-colours like glasses in a church window. Like the roll of the Siegfried song they stood, eternal yet cracking in time and scarved with a melting mist. And suddenly he thought, that mist is symbol of the slipping of rock and life. But in the beat of their beauty was the promise of time.

A tremendous elation leapt through him, a sweeping mount of discordant sound and colour and he thought, that's it. The recurrent stir of eternity of mind and beauty and joy. And he thought, I could paint that. He could paint the colour and surge of this sudden knowledge and catch the sense of time's pulse above the infinitesimal standing of the hills.

Schostokovitch could do it in music. T. S. Eliot could perhaps put it in words. But music is intangible and words are dry. But he could paint it in swirls of vital colour. He could paint in colours of a rhythm of the flux of death through life and cosmic living in the turn of death and the lake-deep blue of moons through eternity. If only he had paint and a canvas— or even a board, he could paint it. The longing for the instruments of his creation was an agony in him as the mountains changed their tone. Then, suddenly as it had come, the feeling fell.

The soldier on the floor at his feet was pulling at his trouser leg. "Hey, there. What's the matter?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"You looked like you were seeing ghosts. Or hearing music."

"Music?" Paul smiled. "Maybe I was," he said.

The boy looked at him strangely He was a fine-looking chap, but the wonder and the scorn and a slight fear were in his face. The bone contours of his face were very like Paul's father's. But Paul felt

suddenly sorry for him. The look on his face was empty.

"Uh — why'd you say you were going to L. A.?" the boy asked uneasily, probably because Paul had been staring at him.

The contours of the boy's face were like his father's. The contours of his face and of his mind. But it didn't matter. This boy and his father could look at the mountains and see only grey rocks.

Paul stood up and let his hand brush the boy's hair. He was so beautiful and young and strong. His hair was smooth and crisp. He was a handsome chap. He looked as Paul's father must have longed to look once. The high anticipation of going home was gone. It had been foolish. But three years was a long time.

"I'm going home," he said, "to see my father."

# To The Margin

JOY HIGDON

The castle was a huge gray mass of stone, high on the hill. Once it had been the splendor and austerity of Tintagel, castle of King Arthur. Now, a bleak gray ruin, the splendor and awe-inspiring quality persisted.

She climbed the hill, struggling against the wind, which, jealously inhabited the castle alone. The mist, rising from the sea, clung to her face and saltly dampened her lips. The mist, as she gained the peak of the hill, engulfed her with the grayness of unreality. Breathlessly she climbed upon a parapet and settled her good British wool skirt about her knees. She could see the short stretch of the beach in the cove from where she sat. It was gray, as was the ominous sea. It was gray, as was the solid hill, the massive castle. Gray waves piled upon each other and impatiently rushed toward the shore, breaking whitely against the sand. High in the sullen sky, white winged sea gulls screeched and swooped down to eat of the tawny sea weed which, ruthlessly, the tempestuous water had cast upon the shore. Upon the shoulders lining the beach sat the gulls, eating, looking with wild dignity upon the sea and upon each other. The girl stirred, and the salt in the wind stung her skin. She turned, and the grimness of the castle confronted her.

"King Arthur, King Arthur," she thought, "Brave, noble, cold King Arthur to live in a place like this. Riding down to Camelot. So all day long the noise of battle rolled, among the mountains by the winter sea.

When she turned to the beach again, two red Irish setters were running side by side stretching their long, graceful legs with untamed glee. Proudly they held their heads against the wind. It caught in their burnished hair, and the free swiftness of the wind and of the animals were one.

The girl narrowed her eyes, peering through the mist.

And a tall man, in gray, cold mail strode along the beach.